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HOMELAND SECURITY SECRETARY RIDGE PLEDGES RIGOROUS OVERSIGHT OF FUNDS

WASHINGTON – Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge today pledged that the one-year-old Department of Homeland Security would exercise “rigorous” oversight to ensure dollars invested yield stronger security.

In his first appearance before the Senate Budget Committee, Ridge responded to concerns that the large increases requested for his Department’s budget be used wisely. “There is a shared responsibility for us to oversee where these dollars go,” Ridge said.

The Homeland Security Budget would increase 9.7 percent under the President’s proposal, the largest increase of any area. Most other budget areas except defense would remain at about the same levels as last year.

Budget Committee Chairman Don Nickles said, “I want to make sure we’re spending the money wisely. We need adequate and good oversight to make sure these funds are well spent and I intend to do that.”

In his prepared statement, Ridge summarized the Department’s progress, stating that the Department “has made great organizational strides during the first year of operations. Nearly 180,000 employees and a budget of \$31.2 billion were brought under DHS less than a year ago. The Department established a headquarters operation and successfully began operations on March 1, 2003 - bringing together the legacy agencies and programs that now make up DHS.”

Senator Jeff Sessions (R-AL) praised Ridge’s dedication to managing his vast Department, stating “You have had the greatest responsibility of assimilating 22 agencies into one cohesive unit. That is not an easy task and I salute you for your hard work.”

Senator Judd Gregg (R-NH) added, “I want to congratulate the Department in its efforts to promote a positive integration program and a positive atmosphere.”

The Senate Budget Committee has heard testimony over the past three weeks from the Congressional Budget Office, the Office of Management and Budget, HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson and Treasury Secretary John Snow. The Committee will question Secretary of State Colin Powell Thursday, February 26, during what will be the committee's final hearing before crafting the FY05 Budget Resolution.